

1. How the precepts appear in Asanga's *Compendium of Determinations*

Asanga explains the precepts by way of two subdivisions:

The first set of subdivisions is:

- i. Rely on excellent persons
- ii. Listen to the excellent teachings
- iii. Contemplate them properly
- iv. Cultivate a practice that conforms with the teachings

The second set of subdivisions is:

- i. Do not let your senses get distracted
- ii. Take up the precepts correctly
- iii. Be compassionate toward living beings
- iv. Strive to make periodic offerings to the Three Jewels

The first set of subdivisions

i. *Rely on excellent persons*

Once we take refuge, we should look for fully qualified spiritual teachers. It is essential to rely on such teachers, for they are the representatives of the Buddha. Therefore, we should respect and rely on them the way we respect and rely on the Buddha. This precept pertains to taking refuge in the Buddha.

ii. *Listen to the excellent teachings*

The second precept is to listen to and study the sublime Dharma. This constitutes spending as much time as possible to listening to teachings and to reading Dharma books.

iii. *Contemplate the teachings properly*

However, merely listening to teachings and reading Dharma books is not sufficient. It is important to also reflect upon their meaning. We should engage in extensive analysis on the teachings in order to get a thorough and deep understanding, and be able to engage in meaningful practice. This will protect us against afflictions and over time gradually reduce and eliminate these afflictions.

The precept of listening and contemplating the excellent teaching pertains to taking refuge in the Dharma.

iv. *Cultivate a practice that conforms with the teachings*

The fourth precept of cultivating a practice pertains to taking refuge in the Sangha because once we take refuge in the spiritual community we should practice in a manner similar to them, i.e. to those who have attained one of the Arya paths. We should regard them as examples and feel inspired by their attainments.

In general, we should associate with any serious Dharma practitioner, seek their advice and rejoice in their spiritual attainment.

The second set of subdivisions

i. *Do not let your senses get distracted*

In order to develop more concentration we should withdraw our inattentive mind from the objects of the senses, for they excite the mind and weaken its ability to stay focused.

Furthermore, one of the main obstacles to Buddhist practice is the manifestation of afflictions, such as anger, attachment, jealousy, and so forth. These afflictive emotions mostly manifest in dependence on taking to mind particular sense objects. Therefore, it is extremely important to avoid sense objects that trigger afflictions. Such avoidance forms the foundation of meaningful practice. However, when in particular situations we are unable to stay away from and avoid distractive sense objects we should apply mindfulness in order to prevent the mind from becoming completely spellbound by an object.

ii. Take up the precepts correctly

One very important aspect of Buddhist practice is the taking of vows. The Buddha prescribed three categories of vows:

- (1) the Pratimoksha vows
- (2) the Bodhisattva vows
- (3) the Tantric vows

Taking Buddhist vows refers to making promises to the Three Jewels to engage in certain actions and avoid others. When we keep a vow purely we accumulate extremely powerful and positive karma. When we break the vow, on the other hand, we accumulate extremely negative karma which may result in various obstacles to our spiritual progress within this and future lives. Therefore, it is advisable to only take the vows that suit our spiritual level and that we feel confident we can keep as purely as possible.

If we do not feel ready yet to take lifelong vows, we could start by taking the one-day Mahayana vows. If we do not want to take any vows at all, we can still accumulate great merit by merely making a pledge to ourselves that we will engage in a certain action and avoid another. If, for instance, we do not want to take the vow to refrain from killing, we can make the pledge that we will not kill another living being. As long as we keep that pledge, even while we are asleep, we create a lot of positive potential.

iii. Be compassionate toward living beings

Buddhas' main concern is the welfare of sentient beings and they are completely under the control of their love and compassion. Therefore, when we take refuge, particularly in the Buddha, we should at least make an effort to be more kind and compassionate. Every day we should spend some time to reflect on the disadvantages of anger and resentment, and to meditate on love and compassion for others. And even if we are unable to feel love and compassion toward some individuals we should try to be very mindful in our dealing with them so that we not fall under the sway of anger and resentment and cause them suffering.

iv. Strive to make periodic offerings to the Three Jewels

Since we take refuge in the Three Jewels we should make daily offerings to them. Through this we accumulate sufficient merit, enabling us to receive their protection and thereby progress on the path. Before every meal we should offer our food. Even when we take as little as a sip of coke we should take a moment to offer it. Although the Three Jewels do not need whatever we offer, we need the merit that we accumulate when doing so.

Besides offering food and drink we could also offer whatever pleasing objects of the senses we encounter. We could offer a beautiful landscape, the blue sky, a sunset, a cooling breeze, a display in a shop window, a nice song on the radio, a great movie, a meaningful conversation, and so forth.

How the precepts appear in the oral tradition

This section explains the refuge precepts according to the way some of the most accomplished yogis explained them in the oral tradition. Even though many of the instructions we receive are based on written teachings that originated either from the Buddha or other great teachers, there are also numerous teachings that were passed down orally in an unbroken lineage from one realized master to the next. In particular, many of the oral instructions presented by Lama Tsongkhapa in the ***Lam Rim Chenmo*** are special instructions from the great Indian Pandit Atisha, who orally passed them down to his highly accomplished disciples.

The oral tradition has two subdivisions:

- 1) The special precepts (which relate to each of the Three Jewels separately)
- 2) The general precepts (which relate to the Three Jewels in common)